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ABSTRACT

Foreign language reading should be taught to students of business language because (1) it will provide skills necessary for them to keep informed about current events in their country of expertise, and (2) research suggests that development of receptive language skills can result in improvement of productive skills. Pre-reading, reading, and post-reading strategies can be used to improve students' ability to deal with texts and to use existing knowledge for better comprehension. Pre-reading activities can fill in some gaps in background knowledge and develop the conceptual schemata or structures for new information. Reading activities develop skills in skimming, scanning, and extensive and intensive reading, and can easily be adapted to business-related materials. Post-reading activities promote synthesis, stimulating students to move beyond the text and apply their knowledge. Good reading strategies will give students the tools to continue to teach themselves after graduation. (MSE)

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READING STRATEGIES FOR THE BUSINESS FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

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READING STRATEGIES FOR THE BUSINESS FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

When the first Business Foreign Language classes were introduced in this country, their principal focus was on writing skills, more particularly the format and style of official business correspondence. More recent textbooks stress speaking and listening skills, in keeping with the growing realization that while it may be possible to communicate with many of our trade partners in English, one has a considerable edge on one's competitors if one can communicate in the language of the client. Throughout this evolution, the reading skill has been largely neglected. The textbooks have reading passages, but little has been done to develop students' ability to read the specialized texts that the world of business produces.

This article explores several areas relating to the development of reading skills in the Business Foreign Language classroom:

1) the rationale for teaching reading skills to

Business Foreign Language students;

2) current ideas in reading pedagogy;

3) application of those ideas to the Business Foreign Language classroom.

Why, then should we take the time to teach reading skills in the Business Foreign Language classroom? First of all, conversations with those involved in international business have convinced me that one of the most valuable skills our students can offer future employers is an understanding of the cultural context in which business transactions take place. Many of our students who will go on to work in international business may only rarely have the opportunity to go abroad. They can, however, be of great value to their employers if they have the skills to remain informed about current events--political, economic and cultural--in the country of their expertise. Therefore a major goal of my one-semester Business French course is to give students the skills necessary to read the major magazines and newspapers of the French press.

Furthermore, research in foreign language acquisition suggests that teaching the receptive skills--listening and reading--may actually serve to develop

the productive skills. At the height of the audio-visual era in language teaching, it was believed that students should never be exposed to language more complex than that which they could produce. Krashen hypothesizes, however, that an important way to develop productive skills is through comprehensible input in the receptive mode, at a level one step above that at which students are currently able to produce. (6, p. 32) Thus the reading skill is not only valuable in itself, but may also serve to improve the writing skill.

Current theories of language learning also stress the use of authentic texts. As mentioned earlier, Business Foreign Language textbooks do indeed contain reading passages, but those passages tend to be written especially for American college students. (See, for example, Fontenilles, 3 and Cummins, 2.) Such texts have their place, but they are not enough by themselves. Some texts also include edited passages taken from newspapers and magazines of the countries where the target language is spoken (Oudot, 7), but even these lack the immediacy and liveliness that can be found by directing students to current issues of periodicals available in most college libraries.

For the above reasons, one of the backbones of my Business French class has become the bi-weekly current events report. Every second Monday students hand in a photocopy of an article found in a recent magazine or newspaper in the library, relating to a topic recently covered in class; in addition they provide a one-page summary of the article, showing how it relates to the course. While this assignment provided a good starting point, it soon became evident that the students varied widely in their ability to read, undirected, such authentic material. The instructor's task became, then, to give them the tools to read more fluently and with greater comprehension.

Current research in the reading process tells us that reading is a complex activity involving the interaction of linguistic knowledge, cognitive skill, and general experience and knowledge of the world. (Phillips, 8, p. 285) This model proved particularly useful in explaining the varying abilities of students at my mid-sized state university. Since the only prerequisite to my Business French course is the completion of fourth-semester French, students in the course have widely

varying linguistic knowledge (from fifth-semester level to senior French majors having spent a year abroad); widely varying cognitive skill (from eighteen-year-old freshmen to seniors, and beyond to non-traditional students), and widely varying knowledge and experience, particularly of the business world (from those who have never studied business to senior marketing majors). The issue of cognitive skills is a complex one, better left to someone with more experience and knowledge in that area. I would like to address here the development of reading comprehension in the Business Foreign Language classroom through techniques designed to improve students' linguistic strategies for dealing with a text and the background knowledge they bring to their reading. These techniques fall into three categories: pre-reading activities, reading strategies, and post-reading activities.

Before students ever see a text, one can prepare them to comprehend it better by pre-reading activities. Our textbooks devote much space to teaching vocabulary, but reading comprehension involves not only knowing the meaning of words, but being willing to make educated hypotheses about the meaning of unfamiliar words. One

technique which has met with some success in my classroom is to present students with a list of key words from the passage to be read. Some may be familiar and others unfamiliar. The students first work in small groups to see how many of the words they can already understand, and guess at the meaning of the unknown words through association with known words in French or English. The results are pooled and at that point most of the words become understandable. They then return to the small groups to work on grouping the words into constellations, using whatever associative techniques they wish. Finally, each student works individually to write a paragraph in which s/he attempts to predict what the article will be about. The result of this activity is that students spend less time in the dictionary while reading, and approach the text with some idea of what it may be about.

Pre-reading activities can also address the gaps in background knowledge which are so evident in the Business Foreign Language classroom. Those who are able to restrict enrollment to students with a basic knowledge of business have a distinct advantage here, but many of us do not have that luxury. Here our textbooks become

important tools. While the reading passages in the textbooks are not sufficient in themselves to develop the reading skills of our students, they can provide important background material which will better allow students to comprehend the more authentic materials we wish them to read. Thus a textbook passage on the history of nationalizations in France was a useful prelude to reading an article on the current financial problems of Renault. Students with previous business coursework can be called upon to share their knowledge with other students, giving brief oral presentations in the target language on such basic business and economic concepts as the law of supply and demand, the marketing mix, or the difference between stocks and bonds.

Background knowledge, however, as it applies to reading comprehension, goes beyond mere possession of factual information. That factual information is organized in the reader's mind into structures that psycholinguists call schemata. Reading comprehension requires the ability to activate the appropriate schema into which to integrate the data from the reading passage. (Carrell, 1, pp. 332-333) Sometimes students fail to comprehend because they simply do not know

how to find the conceptual schema required. In a unit on Foreign Trade, students had difficulty understanding readings on the balance of trade, because they did not understand the effects of fluctuations in the exchange rate. Those students who have traveled abroad, however, have no trouble understanding the effect of the exchange rate on tourists. I therefore devised the following exercise to help them apply that understanding to realms of economic activity beyond their immediate experience. (Figure 1)

Students work in pairs and usually arrive at the correct answer for most of the situations. This problem-solving approach is far more effective at helping students to internalize the concept than would be a straight presentation of the information, and the students were then prepared to read an article on the balance of trade with greater comprehension.

At other times students may believe they understand what they are reading, when in fact they are applying an inappropriate schema. When my students failed to comprehend readings about the economic plans of candidates from opposing political parties in France, I assumed that they lacked the basic concept of the difference

FIGURE 1

CONSEQUENCES DES VARIATIONS DE TAUX DE CHANGE

Pour chaque activité économique, deux conséquences sont données. Marquex M pour celle qui résulte quand la valeur du franc monte et D pour celle qui résulte d'une descente dans la valeur du franc.

EXPORTATIONS	Plus faciles (ou moins difficiles. . .) Les prix exprimés en monnaies étrangères baissent.	Difficiles. Les prix exprimés en monnaies étrangères montent.
IMPORTATIONS	Plus chères	Moins chères
TOURISTE FRANCAIS A L'ETRANGER	Son pouvoir d'achat diminue.	Son pouvoir d'achat augmente.
TOURISME DE L'ETRANGER EN FRANCE	Plus difficile. Les étrangers ont moins de Francs à dépenser pour une même quantité de leur monnaie nationale.	Plus favorable. Les étrangers ont plus de Francs à dépenser pour une même quantité de leur monnaie nationale.
INVESTISSEMENTS ETRANGERS EN FRANCE	Accéleration. Avec un dollar, l'Américain a plus de Francs, donc les prises de participation paraissent moins chères.	Ralentissement. Pour un Dollar, il y a moins de possibilités d'investir.
INVESTISSEMENTS FRANCAIS A L'ETRANGER	Accéleration. On a davantage de monnaie étrangère pour un Franc.	Ralentissement. Avec un Franc, on a moins de monnaie étrangère.
CONVERSION DE MONNAIES ETRANGERES EN FRANCS FRANCAIS	Il est préférable de convertir la monnaie étrangère en Francs (tout au moins si le Francs ne cesse de monter.	Il est préférable d'attendre, et de convertir en francs dès que le Franc cesse de baisser.
CONVERSION DE FRANCS FRANCAIS EN MONNAIES ETRANGERES	Il faut acheter des devises étrangères et les reconvertir en Francs après la fin de la baisse (mais c'est faire preuve d'un manque total de civisme).	Il faut vendre les devises étrangères et les racheter après la hausse du Franc.

FIGURE 1

CONSEQUENCES OF VARIATIONS IN EXCHANGE RATES

For each economic activity below (left-hand column), two opposite consequences are given. Decide which result will occur when the value of the franc is <u>increasing</u> (I) and which will occur when the value of the franc is <u>decreasing</u> (D).

EXPORTS	Easier (or less difficult...) Prices expressed in foreign currencies decline.	Difficult. Prices expressed in foreign currencies increase.
IMPORTS	More expensive.	Less expensive.
FRENCH TOURISTS ABROAD	Their purchasing power (or the length of their stay!) decreases.	Their purchasing power increases.
FOREIGN TOURISTS IN FRANCE	They have fewer francs to spend for the same amount of their own currency.	They have more francs to spend for the same amount of their own currency.
FOREIGN INVESTMENTS IN FRANCE	Acceleration. The American gets more francs for his dollar, so buying shares of French stock seems less expensive to him.	Slowing. The dollar does not buy as many shares.
FRENCH INVESTMENT ABROAD	Acceleration. The franc buys more foreign currency.	Slowing. The franc buys less foreign currency.
CONVERSION OF FOREIGN CURRENCY INTO FRANCS	It is better to convert now, assuming the franc will continue to rise.	It is better to wait, and to convert as soon as the franc stops dropping.
CONVERSION OF FRANCS INTO FOREIGN CURRENCY	One should buy foreign currency and reconvert to francs at the end of the slump (although to do so is highly unpatriotic!)	One should wait until the franc reaches its high point.

between left and right in politics. We therefore took time to outline the differences between left and right, particularly with regard to economic issues. I found, however, that students were still misunderstanding what they read. The problem turned out to be that not only did some students lack a conceptual schema within which to place the information they were reading, but others who thought they understood the political spectrum were applying a schema which did not correspond to that used by the author of the article. In the United States the word liberal has come to be synonymous with "left-of-center" in politics, including a firm belief in the value of government intervention in the private sector. In France the word libéral has retained its eighteenth-century meaning of laissez-faire. Thus even the knowledgeable students were perplexed, because the French press applies the term libéral to public figures whose policies correspond to what we would consider a conservative ideology. In a subsequent semester I dealt with this problem by having students first activate their existing schema: I wrote the words liberal and conservative (in English) on the board and asked them to enumerate the policies and attitudes that they associated

with each. I then wrote the words libéral and conservateur on the board and showed them that those two words were not opposed to each other in the French mind in the same way that they are in the American mind, that in some instances they may in fact be synonymous, and that they would have to add other words to their vocabulary to account for the oppositions in French politics.

Having been prepared for their reading experience with pre-reading activities, students must also at times be guided in the actual reading process by carefully structured activity. Turning again to the research on reading pedagogy, we can distinguish four different types of reading activity: skimming, scanning, extensive and intensive reading. (Grellet, 5, p. 4) Students need to have experience in all four types of reading, but without guidance many of them, particularly at the early stages of second language acquisition, are likely to try to go directly to intensive reading, getting bogged down in the details of the text without having tried to get a picture of the whole. It is important for us to provide skimming and scanning activities that force them to read quickly and form hypotheses that will help them

comprehend the details at the later stage of intensive reading. I shall not deal here with extensive reading, except to say that at the more advanced level, students can certainly be expected to use the library to research a specialized topic, reading extensively in a particular area.

In understanding the role played by skimming, scanning and intensive reading tasks in student comprehension, it is useful to consider two opposing reasons for lack of comprehension among second language readers. According to Carrell, good reading involves both "bottom-up" and "top-down" processing. By bottom-up she means careful decoding of the text at the word and sentence level, and by top-down she means activating background knowledge and conceptual schemata to help understand the text. (1, p. 333) Some students, especially those who are just beginning to read in the second language, engage in too much bottom-up processing, understandably so, since words and sentences have been the major focus of their language study in the first two years. Others, particularly those with previous study in the subject area concerned (in this case the business majors) tend to over-use top-down processing,

relying too much on their own conceptual schemata, and ignoring the details of the text--grammatical and lexical clues such as connectors, tenses and anaphoric references. The pre-reading activities already described can contribute significantly to the development of top-down strategies, but so also can skimming and scanning activities. Some examples of these follow.

Before a text is actually read word by word, it can be scanned for information or vocabulary that will guide students in a subsequent intensive reading. Early in the semester I give students an article of basic economic interest and they have a limited amount of time --five or ten minutes--in which to find as many words as possible in the text that belong to the "language of business." The value of this exercise is two-fold. First, it forces them to scan the text at a much faster pace than they would do if they were sent home to read it. Second, it is a confidence-building experience, since they discover that they already know some of the language of business, some of the words being cognates and others--such as money, buy and sell--being words they learned in their first semester of language study. In a similar exercise at a later point in the course,

I give them an article on changes in the buying habits of French consumers, and ask them to pick out all the vocabulary relating to increase and decrease. On the level of text organization, one can ask students to scan for words that show relationships among sentences or paragraphs, sorting them into those showing cause, those showing contrast, those showing similarity and so on. (Greenewald, 4, p. 108)

Skimming, like scanning, asks students to move quickly through an unfamiliar text, but instead of asking them for specifics, it asks them to get at the gist of the text. Skimming activities can include such tasks as identifying topic sentences of paragraphs, writing subtitles for paragraphs, and filling in "Who? What? When? Where? Why?" grids. (Phillips, 8, p. 290) Better skimming skills might have helped a student of mine who handed in an article on a parliamentary debate in France over immigration. In her summary she wrote that the socialists were in favor of tighter controls on immigration while the conservatives advocated a policy of compassion towards immigrants. She had tried to skim, but in so doing had focused on the last three paragraphs of the article, in which the author was adding nuance to the basic positions of the two parties,

trying to show that neither was as extreme as one might think. In fact, of course, the basic positions were exactly the opposite of those stated in the summary.

A successful exercise that required both skimming and scanning consisted of giving groups of students brochures about different kinds of bank accounts. The groups then had a limited period of time in which to determine what kind of account was described, its advantages and limitations and who could best make use of it. In this case, the skimming-scanning approach was not intended as a prelude to more intensive reading, but as an end in itself, appropriate to the type of text being read.

When we move from skimming and scanning to the more detailed process of intensive reading of a passage, it is important to guide and verify student comprehension by asking questions that do more than ask them to parrot passages of the text. They should by this time be able to see relationships among various parts of the text and draw inferences from what is stated and apply them to situations beyond the immediate parameters of the text. The following example shows how one can ask questions that encourage all of these strategies.

When my students were given the following text as part of a take-home exam, they had just completed a unit on foreign trade, so most of the vocabulary was familiar to them. In an earlier unit they had read about the importance of government economic plans in determining the directions that business development would take. The appeal of this particular passage was in the things it implied but did not say; it allowed for genuine testing of comprehension rather than just the ability to find answers.

(Figure 2)

Figure 2 -16-

La diversité des produits et le protectionnisme croissant de pays de plus en plus nombreux ont contraint les principaux groupes français à s'internationaliser. S'il est possible d'exporter un avion fabriqué en France, exporter des yoghourts tient de la gageure. BSN a ainsi un chiffre d'affaires export négligeable mais réalise, par ses filiales, 7,3 milliards de francs soit 26,7% de son chiffre d'affaires total. A contrario, Dassault exporte la plus grande part de sa production. Les filiales des groupes français implantées à l'étranger sont le complément indispensable de l'exportation dans la compétition mondiale. . .

Les pouvoirs publics français ont de tous temps, mené une politique de "stop and go" à l'égard des investissements français à l'étranger. Des auteurs du VI^{e} Plan qui préconisaient de hâter la consolidation des grands groupes et de favoriser la notion d'implantation commerciales et industrielles à l'étranger, à ceux du VII^{e} Plan qui vantaient les mérites de l'exportation, la voie est étroite pour les dirigeants d'entreprises.

(Le Nouvel Economiste, Spécial Exportations 85)

Figure 2 -17-

(The diversity of products and the increasing protectionism practiced by more and more countries have forced many French companies to internationalize. While it is possible to export an airplane made in France, exporting yoghurt is a risky business. Thus BSN does a negligeable export business, but through its subsidiaries had a total foreign sales of 7.3 billion francs or 26.7% of its total revenues. On the other hand, Dassault exports most of its production. Foreign subsidiaries of French companies are the indispensable complement to exportation in the competitive world market. . .

The French government has over the years been inconsistent in its attitude twoards French investment abroad. From the authors of the sixth plan who tried to hasten the consolidation of large industrial groups and favored the notion of establishing commercial and industrial operations abroad, to those of the seventh plan who extol the virtues of exporting, the decision-makers in French businesses have to walk a narrow path.)

1. D'après le contexte, quelle est la différence entre s'internationaliser et exporter? (In this context, what is the difference between internationalizing and exporting?)
This question encourages students to deduce the meaning of an unknown word--internationalize--from the context in which it is used. A correct answer shows that they have understood the gist of the entire passage.
2. Pourquoi le protectionnisme oblige-t-il les entreprises à s'internationaliser? (Why does protectionism force companies to internationalize?)
This question treats the unit being tested--on international trade--as background knowledge and asks students to draw on that knowledge (What is protectionism?) to help in understanding the passage.
3. Dans ce contexte, quelle est la différence essentielle entre les avions et les yoghourts? (In this context, what is the significant difference between airplanes and yoghurt?)
This question asks them to draw on their own knowledge of the world--the fact that yoghurt is perishable--in order to grasp the significance of the particular example used in the article. Though the answer seems obvious, some students need to be reminded that their

own knowledge and experience are relevant to the reading process.

4. De quels plans s'agit-il dans le deuxième paragraphe? Pourquoi y a-t-il une telle différence entre les deux? Quel problème cette différence crée-t-elle pour les entreprises en France? (What are the plans mentioned in the second paragraph? Why is there such a difference between them? What problem does that create for businesses in France?)

This question asks them to apply knowledge acquired in a previous unit, again stressing the importance of background knowledge in the reading process.

5. Imaginez que vous travaillez pour une grande entreprise en France qui fabrique des gâteaux secs. Vous voudriez vendre vos gâteaux aux Etats-Unis. Quelles questions devez-vous vous poser avant de décider s'il faut exporter ou vous internationaliser? (You work for a large company in France specializing in cookies. You would like to sell your cookies in the United States. What questions will you ask before deciding whether to export or internationalize?)

This last question asks the students to move beyond the text and imagine how they would apply the

information it contains to a situation in the real world. One could move beyond this question to a simulation exercise in which one group in the class represents the cookie company, another the French government, and others the various American groups they would have to deal with to carry out their project.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that I believe we <u>should</u> spend time teaching Business Foreign Language students to read. We should ask them to read not merely to gain information to pass the course, but to gain skills that will allow them to continue to acquire new information when they leave the course. We can never prepare all our students adequately for the variety of working situations in which they may eventually find themselves, but by teaching them to be skillful readers, we can give them the tools to continue to teach themselves.

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